

BETRAYAL

Matthew 26, 27 selected
March 23, 1980

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

"Is it I, Lord?" What a curious way to respond to the announcement that someone in the group is a traitor. The normal reaction in that situation is reflexive and defensive - "It's not me!" It's amazing how many things go awry in an average household, how many tools misplaced, lights left burning, doors unlocked without anyone apparently being at fault. "Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?" the Sunday School teacher asked and a young student answered immediately, "I don't know, but it wasn't me." Ordinarily, you and I do not react to the announcement that there is foul play among us by asking whether or not we might be the perpetrator. Our first instinct is to declare our innocence. Our second instinct is to look around and try to figure out who did it.

"Is it I, Lord?" A curious thing to say - unless betrayal is complex; unless sometimes betrayal can happen unintentionally; unless, in fact, you can betray a person without really knowing that you're doing it. Then, "Is it I?" becomes a legitimate and appropriate question.

Jean Paul Sartre, French existentialist, philosopher and author, seems sometimes to want to believe in God, but can't because of the absurdity and meaninglessness he sees in the human situation. In a short story, The Wall, Sartre argues that life is absurd, without meaning, precisely because the worst betrayals sometimes are not intentional. The story goes something like this. A political prisoner has been tried and condemned to die. After the anguish of trying to make a kind of peace with his fate, he summons the courage from somewhere deep inside himself to defy his captors one last time. He will do it, he decides, by making them look foolish - the worst thing one can do to pompous, strutting militarists. He recalls that his captors have offered to reprieve him if he will reveal the whereabouts of the leader of the underground movement of which he is a member. His life - in exchange for information. Under torture and endless interrogation he had not given an inch. But now, in defiance, in order to strike a blow for freedom and decency and his own integrity, he reports to the office of the commandant and announces that he has changed his mind. He knows where the man they really want is hiding in a very obscure location, in a tool shed in a cemetery. The tale he has created and woven is so unlikely that his captors accept it very reluctantly. A squad of soldiers is dispatched finally and the prisoner is sent back to his cell, thoroughly enjoying now the thought of the soldiers searching frantically for the leader of the underground in a cemetery tool shed. It is a very pleasant vision. How foolish they must feel!

Later, guards come to his cell, he assumes to escort him to the firing squad. Instead, however, he is allowed to walk in the prison yard, to enjoy the sun. Now, very wary, he asks another prisoner if anything unusual has happened. "Nothing much," the man replies, "except I heard that they finally caught up with the leader of the underground, found him in a tool shed in a cemetery of all places. Executed him on the spot."

Sometimes, Sartre seems to be suggesting, betrayals happen for what appear to be good reasons. Sometimes people do very bad things out of what appear to be noble motives. Sometimes great evil happens even though no one ever intended it that way. Has anything like that ever happened to you? It's one of the worst feelings imaginable.

At the very least we can understand that betrayal is an altogether relative word. Depending on which side is doing the defining some traitors look rather like heroes. In His Majesty's Colonies in the mid-eighteenth century, there were a number of notorious traitors, who blatantly betrayed their country. Their names were Sam Adams, Tom Paine, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson. From the point of view of the British Parliament, they were betrayers.

Often, if not always, the people who end up with the title "Traitor" are people of deep commitment, strong loyalty, often selfless devotion. They are often people of passion and great courage. They may be wrong. They may, in fact, be responsible for great evil, but often they are people of admirable character.

Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Jesus, is generally consigned to hell by everybody in history who ever thought about him. Dante did it with great flare in his Divine Inferno. In that work Satan himself, a three-headed monster, lives in the pit of hell, in an icy lake of human tears. In each of three mouths he is forever consuming Brutus, Cassius, and in the middle, Judas Iscariot, the worst traitor in all of history. That is where history has consigned him. But before we do that, before we resolve the issue of Judas as an instance of total treachery, let's be open to the possibility of further truth.

Who was he anyhow? The Gospel writers are obviously reluctant to tell us. Every time his name comes up they add automatically - "who betrayed him"; or, "Judas, one of the twelve" - as if they themselves can't believe what happened. After the fact, the writers are ashamed of Judas. They are not objective about him at all. And so he remains the most enigmatic person in the Gospel narratives. He was, at the very least, a man of great potential. Jesus saw something important in him, something that could become vital in the process of the Kingdom. What was it? Was it the same characteristic which led him to betrayal? His passion perhaps? His commitment? His decisiveness?

He was, apparently, a Judean, in the middle of eleven Galileans; geographically one southerner and all the rest northerners. Was he an outsider in terms of friendship, too? He became the treasurer of the small group. Jesus and His entourage of twelve friends spent a portion of three years traveling. Someone had to arrange for funds and meals and places to stay. Judas was the one, performing a valuable, if unromantic function. When a woman emptied out a bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus, an act of lovely extravagance, a kind of symbolic anointing for death which He accepted at face value, it was Judas who remonstrated, with levelheaded common sense, that the perfume could have been sold and the proceeds distributed to the poor.

He was, we begin to see, a deeply committed man: strong, effective, efficient, loyal. Most of the scholars who work with the texts and the fragmentary data of history conclude that Judas was, above all else, passionately patriotic. Some believe that he was a member of the Zealots, an underground, revolutionary, political party devoted to independence and freedom for Israel. The Zealots effectively harassed the Romans, using classic guerrilla tactics of surprise raids, murder and intrigue. Their purpose was to prepare for the day when the whole nation might rise up and drive the hated Romans into the sea.

The Zealots based their revolutionary activity in scripture. The Zealots loved passages of Scripture such as our Old Testament lesson this morning. In the book of Isaiah and elsewhere they read about God doing a new thing for His people. They knew what that meant...The Messiah - a leader who would be a new king, from the line of David. He would carry the people with Him and reestablish the monarchy and the former glory of the Kingdom. The Zealots were admirable, romantic, brave. We like the character. We much prefer the French Underground to the collaborators. We admire the Resistance, not Vichy. We would have liked Judas and his friends and what they were doing.

The Zealots were watching and waiting for the Messiah. When He came, they would be ready to fight with Him and die for Him.

What Judas actually did is terribly familiar. He went to the officials of the Temple in Jerusalem who intended to get rid of Jesus as quickly as they could anyway, and offered to lead them to Him and to identify Him for the purposes of arrest. To seal the bargain the Temple authorities gave him thirty pieces of silver. Judas played it straight. He left the table in the Upper Room - in the middle of some opaque references to betrayal, met the Temple guards and led them to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, to prevent a quick substitute by one of Jesus' friends, he identified Jesus by greeting Him in the way customary for disciple and Rabbi, with a kiss.

It couldn't have been the money. The amount is not significant, I am told. Fifty dollars, perhaps. It simply doesn't make sense for a disciple of three years to sell out his master for a few dollars:

Again, the scholars believe that Judas was a disappointed and disillusioned patriot. Assume for a moment that he was a Zealot. When Jesus intentionally entered Jerusalem in the way the Messiah was supposed to arrive, and when the common people wildly welcomed Him to a city filled with religious pilgrims celebrating their liberation from oppression centuries before, and when Jesus went straight to the Temple and ejected physically the very symbols of corrupt religion and politics, Judas thought that the moment had come. The revolution was about to begin. All it needed now was for Jesus to say the word. When He didn't, when instead of the speech which set off the revolt, He withdrew to Bethany for the night, Judas knew that the moment, the moment for which he had given three years of his life, had come and gone - slipped through his fingers as quickly as water. And so in profound disappointment, perhaps rage, Judas betrayed his master. Perhaps he did so, convinced that Jesus was an imposter, a fraud, a hoax who had deluded Judas and a lot of others with His delusions of grandeur about God's Kingdom, and then betrayed them by His loss of nerve at the last moment.

That seems to me to be a distinct possibility. And it could have been even more subtle. Perhaps Judas thought that Jesus was, himself, waiting for the right moment: that Jesus was watching and waiting to see if any of His friends had the heart for real confrontation and conflict. Perhaps He was intentionally waiting for someone to set up a situation in which His hand would be forced and He would have reason to respond with strength and to mobilize the popular following which He had gathered. Perhaps - and this is the saddest and the most plausible possibility - Judas left the Upper Room, not knowing that he was the betrayer, instead thinking that he was the only one who really understood Jesus. How else to explain what must be the most forlorn sentence in the Bible: "When Judas saw that He was condemned, he repented..." Does it mean what it says? Judas didn't know? Judas didn't intend for Him to be condemned? Judas thought that he was acting with decisiveness and courage, and suddenly saw that he was responsible for Jesus' "death"? The most forlorn sequence in the Bible..."He brought back the thirty pieces of silver - saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' They said, 'What is that to us?'...And throwing down the pieces of silver in the Temple, he departed: and he went and hanged himself." (Matthew 27:3-5).

Perhaps we have made Judas into such a scoundrel because that disguises the fact that the betrayal was appallingly human and terribly familiar. Perhaps if we consign Judas to the pits of hell we will not have to confront the truth that betrayals are not always treacherous and betrayers are sometimes doing the best they know how to do, and that almost always betrayals happen when personal priorities begin to rule our behavior and we discover, to our delight, that we can rationalize whatever we want to do.

I don't know many people who have broken the promise of fidelity and betrayed a husband or wife, who intended to be treacherous. People don't often mean to hurt one another. People don't plan to betray. It happens for what seems at the time to be very legitimate reasons. Traitors who give away vital military information believe that they are doing it out of love for their own country. Always they regard their betrayal as an act of high moral courage.

Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote one time: "The older I grow the more I ponder Judas Iscariot. He came so near to not betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. It took courage to join that little band, and Judas had it. Then doubts began. What kind of Messiah was this who refused violent revolution and talked about loving one's enemies? Was not this idealistic Jesus letting them down? So the doubts grew until in an explosive hour - oh, fifty-one votes against forty-nine - Judas sold his Lord - he came so near not doing it, that when he saw what he had done he hanged himself in shame. Ah, Judas, if you had only doubted your doubts to wait until Easter..." (See Lenten-Easter Sourcebook, p.72).

The story of Judas is a description of what happens when we attempt to force Jesus Christ into the mold of our own priorities. Jesus, very simply stated, was not the kind of Christ Judas wanted. And instead of altering his own expectations, Judas destroyed Jesus by trying to force Him to do something He could not do. It is a warning against that dynamic in any age. Jesus can't be enlisted to support our church, priorities, our nation, our way of doing things, our way of life. To force Him is to betray Him.

The story is a warning against fanaticism of any kind. Judas couldn't see the whole picture because of his obsession with one small corner. He couldn't comprehend the whole meaning of Messiahship because of his obsession with a particular aspect. So it is with fanaticism: the whole picture always gets lost. And the small segment becomes badly distorted when forced to stand by itself.

There is a lot to be learned from this forlorn story. But most important of all is that in his zeal for his own priorities, and his shame when he realized where it had taken him, Judas missed the one thing that could have saved his life - the grace and forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ. Judas had read the Scriptures but had not understood. The "new thing" the prophet promised was not a revolution, but salvation; a new dimension of love and grace acted out in history which would forever offer peace to the Judases of the world. He missed that.

Fosdick was right. Too bad he couldn't have waited until the first day of the week. Too bad he couldn't have known that crucifixion wasn't the last word. Too bad he didn't see the church begin and grow in every city of the world. Too bad Judas couldn't have lifted up his remorse, guilt, shame and self-loathing to God, seeing the Cross, not so much as a symbol of his own sin but of God's invitation to wholeness and life and joy. Too bad Judas couldn't have lived long enough to learn that nothing could keep God from loving him - not even the Cross.

Theologians, philosophers have wrestled with the doctrines of the Cross for twenty centuries. The wisest statement I ever heard was made to me, not by a scholar, but a fellow student - from Australia, an ordained clergyman - in this country for a graduate degree. In a particularly skeptical stage of my own pilgrimage I could see nothing in the Cross of Jesus Christ except a symbol of human sin.. I saw it in stark simplicity. Jesus was a good man. Good men can't survive in this world. Corrupt politicians, dishonest religious bureaucrats and cowardly people killed the best man who ever lived. The only thing the Cross stands for, therefore, is injustice, hopelessness, in a word - Sin. I still see that dimension. All the positive thinking in the world doesn't erase it. But a friend helped me a great deal when after a long discussion he concluded, "John, the Cross isn't so much what men did to Jesus, as it is what God did for men."

That's the dimension Judas never saw. That's a dimension we can miss too, if all we perceive in his story is a bad man doing a very bad thing. Judas was loved, too - Jesus never stopped loving him. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" could have applied to him as well. "Is it I?" Each of us could ask that. Each of us has betrayed. But the point of the whole exercise is not to blame and assign guilt and exact punishment. The point is good news of a love that reaches out to us in spite of all that. A love big enough to forgive and accept and, in that, to give the gift of new life.